

The League of *Extraordinary Seniors*



Anna Fowlkes

At a time in life when many people are contemplating retirement, reflecting on life's quirky twists and turns, and anticipating afternoon outings on the golf course or with a young grandchild, Anna E. Fowlkes received some shocking news: she was HIV positive at age 59.

Truth be told, she wasn't particularly surprised. Widowed at 45 years, Anna began dating an old classmate in her 50s and later found out he was holding onto a secret – he carried the virus which causes AIDS. When she learned of his secret, Anna figured she had previously been exposed during unplanned, unprotected sex with her friend, but it wasn't until years after he died that she began exhibiting symptoms. When she could barely walk from one room of her house to another without getting winded, she decided to get tested. The chronic fatigue did indeed turn out to be the result of the HIV virus and when Anna found out, she didn't get upset or depressed, she accepted it and said, "What now?"

When Anna began searching for information on the epidemic and how patients similar to her were coping with their condition, she couldn't find any material to which she could relate. Most books and pamphlets were geared to younger people or gay men. "The first time I saw an older adult on a poster about AIDS, he was a gay, white man" she said. "I couldn't relate to that." This inspired her to take it upon herself to give voice to the experiences of older African Americans with HIV. She wanted to warn others to remain vigilant against the disease, comfort those who had already tested positive, and inspire those who are determined to give voice to a growing segment of society.

Now, Anna is more than an advocate, she is an activist and a motivational speaker who promotes healthy behavior choices for sexually active people, regardless of age. She is determined to speak up so others know what can happen and avoid the path she has taken.



Department of Aging